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Editorial

THE CATHOLICISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

What is the Christianity of the New Testament? This has always been a crucial question with theologians and Christian workers. Men have rightly felt that the church can fulfil its mission only if it is true to the ideals of Jesus and his disciples. The canonization of the New Testament was the official recognition of the normative character of this unique religious literature. Reformations in the church have been attempts to purify Christianity from those elements which were not believed to be warranted by this canon. The thousands of Christian commentaries, expositions, theologies, and sermons have had no other aim than to make clearer the meaning of the New Testament. It would seem that after so many centuries of study there should be practical unanimity of opinion as to the content of primitive Christianity. But, as a matter of fact, we find a bewildering diversity of conviction on this vital point. The Roman Catholic finds in the New Testament warrant for the apostolic sacerdotal institution to which he belongs. Each sect of Protestantism affirms that its peculiar doctrines are drawn from the same canonical literature. Even secular agitators have attacked the church of Christ in the name of the New Testament. Amid this Babel arises the voice of the Roman Catholic church declaring that so long as private interpretation of the Scriptures is allowed, no other result than anarchy can be expected. Let men turn from their vagaries to the authoritative exegesis of the true apostolic church, if they would learn what the real religion of the New Testament is.

DOGMATIC EXEGESIS AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The main reason for the existing divergence of opinion as to the meaning of the New Testament is found in the prevalence of the

dogmatic method of interpreting the Bible. It has been assumed that the Christianity of the apostles must be identical in content with the belief of the interpreter. The Catholic has thus found in the New Testament an ecclesiastical organization; the Quaker, a free spiritual brotherhood; the paedo-baptist, sprinkling of infants; the Baptist, immersion of adults; the Calvinist, predestination; and the Arminian, free-will. It was inconceivable to men of former generations that there should be any discrepancy between their honest Christian convictions and the doctrines of primitive Christianity. Each age portrayed Jesus as if he were a contemporaneous figure. The expression of religious ideas in art graphically illustrates this. Look, for example, at Paolo Veronese's magnificent representation of the Marriage Feast at Cana. All the characters wear sixteenth-century Italian costumes. In the background one sees stately buildings in Renaissance architecture. Jesus and the disciples are thus depicted in an environment familiar to the painter, and the event was doubtless made to seem very real to men of the day. But the historical student knows that this painting is untrue to the facts. Recently Professor Weinel has shown how in the past century various types of religious and moral aspiration found objective expression in different portrayals of the alleged historical Jesus. These various ideal pictures were based on the assumption that Jesus must, of course, have inculcated the specific doctrines which the loyal expositor believed to be true.

The historical student makes no such assumption concerning the identity of his own theology with that of the New Testament. He wishes to let the facts speak for themselves, whether they confirm or refute his own personal beliefs. This spirit has enabled scholars of very different theological convictions to agree concerning some of the facts in the New Testament. Lutheran scholars agree with Baptists as to the mode of baptism practiced by the apostles. Trinitarians and Unitarians alike recognize the spuriousness of the text concerning the three witnesses in I John 5:7, and alike admit that Paul taught the divinity of Christ. In so far as the historical method is genuinely scientific, we may hope that there will be growing agreement among scholars as to the real teaching of the New Testament.

THE NEW PROBLEMS RAISED BY HISTORICAL STUDY

But along with this consensus concerning the historical facts of the New Testament history, there arises a problem which was unknown to the older scholars who assumed that the New Testament was homogeneous in its doctrine. The historian discovers that there are widely varying religious teachings within the Scriptures themselves. The Synoptic Gospels present us with a picture of Jesus strikingly different from that of the Fourth Gospel. The Christology of the early chapters of Acts is not identical with that of the Pauline epistles. The relation of Christ to the world and to the believer is portrayed so differently in the Apocalypse and in the Fourth Gospel that most scholars are compelled to attribute the writings to different authors even though tradition has connected them both with the apostle John. We thus have in the earliest Christian literature as well as in later history "varieties of religious experience;" and it is practically impossible to reduce these varieties to a harmonious system of theology. Thus the conflict of theological opinions is brought into the New Testament itself.

WAS JESUS OR PAUL THE FOUNDER OF CHRISTIANITY?

Perhaps the most acute aspect of this problem has been formulated in the above question, which Professor McGiffert asks in the January number of the *American Journal of Theology*. He believes that historical investigation reveals a wide difference between the teachings of Jesus and those of Paul on certain fundamentals. He finds in Paul all the essentials of the theology which ecclesiastical Catholicism has organized and canonized. The total inability of man demanding supernatural transformation by divine grace, the divine nature of Christ as the source of this supernatural grace, and the sacramental efficacy of baptism and the Lord's Supper are fundamentals of Paulinism. If in Paul's epistles man is thus represented as dependent upon supernatural means of salvation, the Catholic theology seems to be a logical development from the New Testament. But on the other hand, Professor McGiffert believes that Jesus himself gave no warrant for these elements of Paulinism. "There is no hint in his teaching of the radical badness and utter helplessness of human nature, of which Paul made so much, and of the consequent necessity

for its transformation by supernatural agency. It is not simply that Paul threw the matter into theological or philosophical form, but that his view of man and his need was totally at variance with Christ's." Thus it would seem that we have to choose between Jesus and Paul on certain fundamentals of Christian faith. If we retain the traditional conception of salvation, we must recognize that historically Paul rather than Jesus is the founder of this type of Christianity. If, on the other hand, we decide to make the Christianity of Jesus normative, we shall be compelled to discredit some of Paul's teachings. In either case, the New Testament seems to be divided against itself. Not that Professor McGiffert insists unduly on this dilemma. He is concerned only to set forth the historical facts. But such an issue seems to be raised by historical scholarship.

IS CHRISTIANITY AN EXTERNAL PROGRAMME OR A TRANSFORMING SPIRIT ?

The above perplexity is due to the persistence of the conviction which accompanied all dogmatic expositions of the Bible, i. e., that the only valid form of Christianity must be the Christianity of the early church. But is this true? Do we as a matter of fact feel that Tissot with his historical realism portrays Christ more truly than does Fritz von Uhde depicting Jesus as if he belonged to the simple peasant life of modern Germany? Do we believe that those who follow literally the command to wash one another's feet are more closely in touch with Jesus than are those who see only a symbolic meaning in the incident? It is the genius of Catholicism as an institution to insist upon the external uniformity of Christianity. But is there not a more genuine Catholicism in the New Testament which cares little for outer conformity but which gathers up the records of widely diverse experiences simply because all are luminous with the new spirit which was derived from Jesus? Do we need to state the issue as if we had to choose between Jesus and Paul? Is it not rather true that we should be unspeakably poorer if we had not the Christianity of Paul, divergent as it is from that of the Synoptic Gospels? In a way, the differing theologies and sects of Christian history have been right in appealing to the New Testament. For the rich variety in that collection of scriptures indicates that from the beginning no

one man, be he Peter or Paul or John or the compiler of a gospel narrative, could exhaust the content of Christianity. If Christ could conquer such different spirits in the first century and transform them with all their personal individuality into ardent apostles, may we not believe that he can likewise conquer the twentieth century, different though it is from the first, in such a way as to conserve all that is distinctive of our age while inspiring it with his spirit and purpose ?

THE NEW TESTAMENT THE CANON OF TRUE CATHOLICISM

The New Testament will thus continue to be a regulative principle in Christian thinking. Not that we shall try to become slavish copyists of its teachings. But we shall ever be recalled from our sectarianism and provincialism by coming into contact with the real Catholicism of these scriptures. Is it not of immense importance that the legalist in every age is expected to learn from Paul ? Does it not steady the emotional mystic to read in the Epistle of James that "faith without works is dead" ? Is it not wholesome for the individualist to feel the spiritual power of Paul's organic conception of the church ? Ought we not to rejoice that the man who would reduce Christianity to mere ethics for this world may have his vision widened by the dramatic eschatology of the Apocalypse ? Is it not a gain for the Unitarian to read the Fourth Gospel and for the Trinitarian to love the human Jesus of the Synoptics ? Is it not a splendid antidote to our modern scientific provincialism to be compelled to gain our acquaintance with Christ through the testimonies of men who spoke in terms of a world-view which we have discarded, but who in spite of scientific crudities have produced an immortal literature ? The problems raised by historical study make impossible, indeed, the Catholicism of an external institution, but they open the way for the triumph of the real Catholicism of the New Testament.